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# Barnes' heresy: Debate on 'contra' aid matters

WASHINGTON — Head-counters for both sides kept revising their tally sheets yesterday as the House started debate on aid for the Nicaraguan "contras." Two votes down here, one wavering there — the talk was all of tactics rather than substance.

In such showdowns, the assumption is that the real persuasion takes place in the Oval Office and in Capitol cloakrooms, not on the floor. Votes get traded for dam and highway projects, or promises of presidential campaign support, and in the end the score depends on whether the White House exerted enough salesmanship to prevail.

But there was one man in the middle of this argument who had the quaint notion that this time what was said in floor debate would decide whether the administration gets its \$100 million to fight the Sandinistas. He was Maryland's Mike Barnes, chairman of the House Latin American affairs subcommittee, the one member who may know more about the details of the issue than anybody else on either side.

As each party's whip lined up his troops for the vote scheduled today, Mr. Barnes believed most of the country and the House had been so inundated by White House rhetoric about the Red hordes headed for our border that they had not heard the realistic objections to the request.

He suspects, for example, that many members are not aware that the much-discussed package — \$70 million for military aid plus \$30 million for non-military aid — is only the visible part of a more extensive administration effort. The president also is asking that Congress remove the restrictions on CIA activity in Nicaragua — operations potentially more provocative than anything done by the "contra" forces.

Those restrictions were placed by Congress after earlier CIA adventures there, including the mining of Nicaraguan harbors and the issuance of a covert-action handbook describing how to assassinate Sandinista supporters. If the restrictions are lifted, Mr. Barnes says, "they could do anything they want to — the administration wants the whole thing to be run by the agency."

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He also is bothered by the administration's reluctance to account for money currently appropriated for aid to the contras. This is not supposed to be covert, but overt aid, administered by the State Department, he says. Yet the General Accounting Office told his subcommittee last fall that it had been spent in such a way that it could not be audited.

House Democrats have initiated a resolution of inquiry formally asking for this information, Mr. Barnes says, but as the debate approached, nothing had been offered.

The congressman disagrees with the administration's contention that today's vote is a simple either-or question — either for resisting communism, or for allowing it to spread through the hemisphere. First, he says, there are other alternatives. Second, he cites what he calls "the fallacy of 'the last move.'"

No other nations in the whole hemisphere support the sending of more U.S. military aid to the contras, Mr. Barnes says. White House assertions that many Latin American leaders support it privately while being politically obliged to oppose it publicly are not backed up by what they have told him directly, he adds.

But there is support among the Latin leaders for diplomatic efforts to prevent the export of Nicaraguan communism, he maintains. He notes a new agreement for neutral countries to patrol the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. But the U.S. administration opposes such an arrangement for the Nicaragua-Honduras border because contra operations are mounted across that bor-

der, he says.

"Diplomacy," he insists, "is not doing nothing."

As for the argument that this \$100 million will be enough to achieve U.S. goals, Mr. Barnes points to intelligence assessments that the contras cannot overthrow the Nicaraguan Marxists. After 18 months, he says, this country must decide again "whether to pull out or escalate — and the obvious escalation is the use of U.S. forces. I believe that's where we're headed if this \$100 million is appropriated."

"We don't know what the Soviet-Cuban response will be. I've been told they might provide SAM [surface-to-air] missiles to the Nicaraguans and the El Salvador rebels. They could bring in 20,000 Cuban troops; then what do we do?"

About here, the congressman feels the need to recall that he himself is a former Marine, thus implying that he is not soft on communism. He agrees that Nicaragua does indeed pose an immediate threat to its neighbors, and that the U.S. Marine Corps could throw the Sandinistas out of power — but at great military and political cost.

The threat is mainly political subversion rather than direct military operations, he says, and it should be resisted the same way. Military effort financed by this \$100 million will not protect U.S. shipping lanes or achieve other strategic ends, he argues. Nor will it be the last move. "The next move," he warns, "is theirs."

Member after member stood yesterday to talk about such points. But except for the cable TV buffs who get to watch floor proceedings all day, few Americans heard reports of anything far beyond last-minute shifts in the vote lineup. Whichever way it shifted, Mike Barnes was excellently positioned to say later, "I told you so."